

Bad can be good¹

The Buddha's teaching is for bad people. We need the Dharma most when we are bad or evil, or when something goes wrong with our life, or we think we have failed in some way. Although it's never too late to seek the Dharma then, why not seek it earlier so that we do not suffer unnecessarily. The fact that we are reading this shows that we have given ourselves some quality time to really seek something that would improve our life.

It is unhelpful to say something like "Person A (or even 'I') cannot change" or "Things won't change." If we harbour such a view, we have neither understood nor accepted the most basic of Buddhist teachings – that of impermanence. Isn't this a bad wrong view? People *can* change, we *need* to change, and change for the better is possible. That is why the Buddha teaches the Dharma.

We sometimes speak of wanting to "change" someone, or that someone needs to change. Often, what this really means is that we want that someone to agree with us, or to submit to our will. We almost never think that *we* ourselves need to change, too. The fact is that we are all the time living with ourselves, so isn't it better to change ourselves rather than to change others? (Dh 158, 166). Often, when we change ourselves or our approach towards others, they too change their attitude towards us for the better. A lot depends on whether we believe this is possible or not, and whether we act on it or not.

The point is that if we think we are "good," then we are only deluding ourselves. If we think we are "bad," or "evil," or "sinful" (so many bad words!) we are also deluding ourselves. Just reflect on this: we are *neither* good *nor* bad, only our actions (through body, speech and mind) are. Yes, karma is intention, the deliberate mind. So, we need to know and tame the mind behind our actions.

There are two discourses called **Miga,sālā Sutta**, one with 6 teachings, the other with 10 teachings,² on how learning the Dharma helps both the bad and the good. Both these suttas have the same interesting teaching: Whether we are bad or good, if we do not study the Dharma, we are not likely to find true happiness here and hereafter. Conversely, whether we are bad or good, if we *do* study the Dharma, we are assured of true happiness here and hereafter.

Both the suttas recount the story of two saintly brothers, Purāṇa and Isidatta, the chamberlains of king Pasenadi of Kosala. Purāṇa, father of the lady Miga,sālā, was a celibate, while her uncle, Isidatta was a chaste married man. Purāṇa totally abstained from sex, while Isidatta was contented with his own wife. Both brothers were streamwinners, but after their deaths were reborn as once-returners in Tusita (the third of the sense-world heavens).

Miga,sālā was doubtful why her father, who was celibate, and her uncle, who was married (but chaste), were both reborn in the same way in the same heaven. She asked Ānanda about this, and Ānanda replied, "That's the way the Buddha has taught it." Later, when Ānanda told the Buddha about the incident, the Buddha

¹ This reflection is based on the two Miga,sāla Suttas: **the (Chakka) Miga,sālā Sutta** (A 6.44), [SD 3.2\(6\)](#) and **(Dasaka) Miga,sālā Sutta** (A 10.75), SD 99.8 (forthcoming).

² For their titles, see preceding note.

basically said that goodness cannot be “measured.” It depends on the person’s spiritual quality.

A person can be good, agreeable and popular, but he learns nothing of the Dharma, his life is not bettered by right view, and he does not enjoy even “momentary freedom of mind” (or simply “Dharma joy”). In due course, he would not be happy, but only suffer the fruits of his karma.

On the other hand, we may be immoral, or strongly lustful, or prone to anger, or mentally restless. Yet, if we still make every effort to understand the true Dharma, and act accordingly, we will happily cultivate a better self in no time:

“Here, Ānanda, a certain person is **immoral**, but he understands according to reality the freedom of mind and the freedom through wisdom, by which that immorality of his ceases without remainder.

He is shaped by what he has heard.

He is shaped by great learning that he has well understood with right view, too.

And he gains temporary freedom.

When his body has broken up, after death, he undergoes excellence, not decline; he goes the way of excellence, not the way of decline.” (A 10.75,5), SD 99.8

Three Dharma terms need to be explained here. The first is “**freedom of mind**” (*ceto,vimutti*), which, in simple terms, means that when we properly meditate, say, doing the breath meditation or cultivating lovingkindness, we would enjoy a sense of freedom where we are simply at peace with body and mind. Although such a freedom is only temporary, we will not easily forget it, and even simply recollecting it will bring us calm bliss or “Dharma joy.”

The second term is “**freedom through wisdom**” (*paññā,vimutti*), the freedom of the mind through deep meditation, that is, dhyana, when we are completely free from the body (that is, we are totally undistracted by the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind), and are fully focused on the calm mind.³

With the calm and clarity of such a mind, we then direct our attention to see true reality (impermanence, and so on) with right view (as having no self or essence). If we do this properly, we will even attain arhathood; if not, at least streamwinning.

The third term is “**temporary freedom**” (*sāmayika vimutti*), that is, the time when we are joyfully at peace with ourself while reading or listening to the suttas, or meditating. This is a time when our mind is free from all mental hindrances. This is the time to simply smile at the joy, and let it be. Occasionally, if we feel like it, we can mentally whisper “Peaceful! Peaceful!”

Whether we think we are “bad” or “good,” “sinful” or “blessed,” we just need to be at peace with ourself. When we are truly happy, we realize that nothing in this world is worth clinging to!⁴ Whatever we cling to takes the shape of our mind, and then we cling to something new. Then, we discard that old view we so dearly held, and now we want others, even the world, to accept the new one, too!

³ On *dhyana*, see **Dhyana**, [SD 8.4](#).

⁴ **Pacalā Sutta** (A 7.58,11), [SD 4.11](#).

Our views are the fancy clothes and baubles we try to hide our naked self with. They are the false masks we wear over the raw skin of self that easily smarts and bleeds when views flood us like flies settling on flayed cattle.

If we only think of ourself as being bad or evil, then we are looking at only our failures, or trying to make the wrong people happy the wrong way. If we only think how good or right we are, then we are blind to our own weaknesses until it is too late.

These are views that fly in our heads and lay their eggs in our raw flesh. If we do not skillfully remove these flies' eggs, they will become maggots in our eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind, that eat away into our very being. We have to discard these eggs as soon as they are laid, dress our wounds with lovingkindness, and smoke away the flies with clear vision.⁵

Does this mean that we should empty our minds and close our hearts? We can try to, but we would only be empty-headed and narrow-minded. It's good to begin with an inquiring mind: Why do I think like this? What do I really want in life? Why? and then Why? again. This method of self-analysis is called "thought-reduction": it helps us get to know our mind better.⁶

The purpose of life is to be happy. Being happy is a habit, as being depressed is, too. But being happy is a habit we often forget or neglect; so, we need more effort to be happy, and to forget and neglect being depressed.

But what does this mean? No ready-made answers here. We have to work this ourself by trying the thought-reduction method. Reading and listening to the suttas is a great way of seeing the meaning and purpose of life more clearly.

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⁵ See **Go,paka Moggallāna Sutta** (M 33), SD 52.6.

⁶ This is the 4th of the 7 methods of overcoming distractions in meditation: see **Vitakka Saṅṭhāna Sutta** (M 20,6), [SD 1.6](#).